

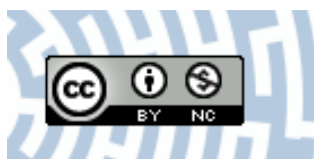


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## Disability and Child Abuse: an Introduction to Study Review<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The paper presents a review of the most representative and frequently quoted in literature studies which were focused on the relationship between child abuse and disability. Although these studies have been undertaken intensively only since 1990, researchers are sure that the connection between these two phenomena is clear and indeed it is sophisticated. The author of the paper proposes a picture – a kind of systematization of the main directions of research into the subject. The research tendencies that were revealed in the overview done by the author on the basis of the content of the most representative in periodical child abuse literature *Child "Abuse and Neglect. The International Journal"*, are illustrated with examples of studies and their outcomes. This proposition of the systematization may be useful for researchers by inspiring them to undertake their own investigations. In turn, developing empirical and theoretical analyses of the problems concerning child maltreatment, in the context of children's or parents' disability, may prove beneficial for intervention practice. The paper is particularly addressed to researchers from countries where the subject has not been studied so far, has been neglected or the field of connections between disability and abuse has not been considered as an important one (eg. to Polish researchers).

**Key words:** *disability, abuse, child abuse, study review*

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<sup>1</sup> Some parts of this paper were presented at the international conference "Special Pedagogy – theory and reality", Świnoujście–Copenhagen, 25–27 September 2007.

## Introduction

There is a relationship between disability and child abuse - claim contemporary researchers – moreover, connections between them, have indeed a multifaceted character.

The review of the world contemporary literature on child abuse, based on the contents of prestigious international journals which are focused on the issue of child abuse ( i.e. “*Child Abuse and Neglect. The International Journal*” and “*Child Abuse Review*”, and some other available sources, e.g. “*Journal of Disability Policy Studies*”), which has been done in this analysis, revealed various issues on which empirical studies were undertaken in last decades. An attempt to organize them into some dominating directions of research that has been done, just to propose some kind of systematization, was the aim of our review. So, we intended to identify areas and directions of investigations carried out by researchers from various countries. Special kind of motivation was brought by the picture of the subject in Polish literature; very few have considered connections of disability and child abuse within the family. The overview of the native literature, which I conducted<sup>2</sup>, revealed that rather few publications that tackled the issue can be found in it<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> The sources on which I based my studies include: the bibliographic references in an internet portal developed by Nobody’s Children Foundation, the contents of “*Dziecko Krzywdzone*” (*Abused Child*) and “*Niebieska Linia*”, (*Blue Line*) the most representative of the Polish journals dealing with the problem of child abuse; and other periodicals, monographic and collective publications.

<sup>3</sup> The mentioned publications include e.g. : D. Majnartowicz, *Problemy wykorzystywania seksualnego dzieci i młodzieży z upośledzeniem umysłowym*, “*Problemy Rodzinne*” 1995, no. 6; D.Mejnartowicz, *O tym się mówi – problem wykorzystywania seksualnego osób z upośledzeniem umysłowym*, “*Bardziej Kochani*” 1999 no. 3; J.Maćkowicz, *Przemoc wobec dziecka w rodzinie*, “*Problemy Opiekuńczo-Wychowawcze*” 2004, no. 5, J. Maćkowicz, *Nauczyciele wobec problemu dziecka krzywdzonego w rodzinie: komunikat z badań*, “*Nowa Szkoła*” 2005, no. 8, E. Pisula., *Rodzice a niepełnosprawne dziecko*, „*Niebieska Linia*” 2003, no. 4 (27), K. Kubiak, *Niepełnosprawność to źródło przemocy czy siły?*, “*Niebieska Linia*” 2003, no. 4 (27), *Ochrona dzieci niepełnosprawnych w Wielkiej Brytanii*, “*Niebieska Linia*” 2003, no. 4 (27), A. Starega, *Przemoc wobec osób niepełnosprawnych*, “*Niebieska Linia*” 2003, no. 4 (27). I can also point out a few other publications dealing with the issue, such as *Problemy zaniedbywania, maltretowania i wykorzystywania seksualnego dzieci niepełnosprawnych* by Starowicz D., Starowicz Z., (in:) *Profilaktyka zespołu maltretowanego dziecka*, ed. J.Kordackiego, Łódź 1994. Certain references to Polish research and publications related to sexuality issues for youth with disabilities are presented by Danuta and Zbigniew Lew Starowicz (...op.cit.). There is also an important paper by Anna Piekarska, entitled *Krzywdzenie dziecka z zaburzeniami rozwojowymi. Przegląd zagadnień teoretyczno-badawczych oraz zastosowanie taksonomii krzywdzenia dziecka*, published in the periodical “*Dziecko Krzywdzone*” 2007, no.2 (19)

## **The main research directions**

The examination we conducted revealed that concerning the connections between disability and child abuse it is possible to specify some fundamental directions of research:

### **I. The range of child abuse among the population of children with disabilities**

This direction seems to dominate over the empirical studies which are being conducted. The main subject of these examinations (although not all) is usually to establish *to what extent disability determines the increased risk of child abuse*. This area of research has been particularly popular in the United States, where 22 extensive research projects, focusing on the range of abuse of children with disabilities, have been undertaken since 1992. The examples are the projects in the USA, by Sullivan and Knutson (1998 and 2000). These epidemiological and comparative studies were carried out in Nebraska, and they revealed the fact that children with disabilities are maltreated by their parents 3.4 times more often than children without disabilities. In another study which was the case study of child abuse reports made to CPS (*Child Protective Services*), conducted by Westat Inc, determined that, overall, the estimated incidence of maltreatment among children with disabilities was 1.7 times greater than the estimated incidence in children without disabilities. There were also other nationwide comparative studies, conducted in the USA, which reveal the fact that the rate of abuse among children with disabilities is 1.7 times higher than among children without disabilities (Crosse, Kaye & Ratnofsky, not dated.; Elvik et al., 1990). The studies conducted by Crosse and other researchers (nd) indicated that 21.3 out of 1000 children without disabilities were maltreated by their parents every year, whereas in the group of children with disabilities, 35.5 out of 1000 children suffered from maltreatment. At the same time it should be noticed that due to encountered methodological difficulties, and the character of the statistics and collected data on which research has been based it is difficult to measure the real incidence of child abuse (Mitchell & Buchele-Ash, 2000). Hence, some researchers opt for a retrospective study, a strategy which involves examining adults with disabilities, and looking back into their childhood, analyzing their child maltreatment experiences and thus attempting to measure the real incidence of the phenomenon (Wald & Knutson, 2000; Kvam 2000; Lindsay, et al., 2001).

### **II. Type of disability and forms of child abuse and neglect**

Among examples of studies aimed at exploring the relationship between the type of child abuse and type of disability, we can point to the research conducted by

Knutson et al. (2004), into the differences between disciplinary choices of mothers of profoundly deaf children and mothers of normally hearing children. The studies undertaken by Sullivan and Knutson (2000), or those conducted by Crosse et al. (n.d.), in which their authors made an attempt to identify the type of abuse most frequently experienced by children with disabilities, not taking into account the type of disability, should also be mentioned. The fact worth notifying is that the findings from the two studies were not consistent with one another. Crosse et al. (n.d.), for example, found that the most common form of maltreatment of children with disabilities is emotional abuse, followed by physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect. Sullivan and Knutson (2000), however, estimated different likelihood of maltreatment of children with disabilities, regarding emotional abuse as the most likely form, followed by neglect, physical abuse, and considering sexual abuse to be the least likely form of maltreatment. Their previous study of child abuse recorded by hospitals in Nebraska revealed that the most common form of abuse for children with disabilities was neglect, but it was also found that more than half of those children experienced various forms of maltreatment (Sullivan and Knutson 1998). However, when examining the impact of disability type on child abuse, the findings of Crosse et al. and Sullivan and Knutson's investigations brought the same results. The studies examined the following types of disability: mental retardation, speech/language impairments, emotional disturbance, learning disabilities, physical health impairments, and hearing and visual impairments. They indicated that of all types of disabilities, those manifested emotional and behavioural disorders, showed the highest prevalence rate of abuse. Both of these studies also found that the disabilities which place children at greater risk of abuse include: speech/language impairments, mental retardation, physical health impairments, and learning disabilities. Sullivan and Knutson even estimated the risk of a particular form of maltreatment in relation to the type of disability. For example, the researchers found that children with behavioural disorders are 7 times more likely to be neglected and physically abused, and 5.5 times more likely to be sexually abused than children with other disabilities. Mentally retarded children are 4 times more likely to experience all forms of maltreatment than children without disabilities. The risk of all types of maltreatment for children with orthopedic problems and learning disabilities is "only" twice higher when compared with children without disabilities (Sullivan & Knutson, 2000).

Some studies suggest that the risk of maltreatment for children with disabilities can be determined by the severity of their disability. For instance, it has been revealed in the studies conducted by Benedict et al. (1990), that children with a mild disability may be at a greater risk for maltreatment than those with a more severe disability, since parents, as the researchers explain it, have some expectations of their children, who are not able to meet them .

### III. Characteristics of disabled children as victims of abuse

Many researchers maintain that one of the factors which places children with disabilities at risk for abuse is the fact that they very often lack knowledge or understanding of the situation, they lack the knowledge concerning improper and indecent behaviour towards them as abuse. Not rare are situations when even if they recognize their parents' behaviour as wrong, they might not try to defend themselves against them, for fear of losing parents' favour and affection. It is also noticed that the self-defense of a disabled child is very often impossible due to the degree and kind of the child's disability (Wolcott (1997) quoted after: *The risk and prevention...*; Bennett & Baladerian, 2005). Other researchers, such as Hobbs et al. (1993), Schor (1987, or Sinanson (1993), emphasize that certain characteristics which children with disabilities display can contribute to increased risk factors related to their abuse. They include the child's communication problems; motor impairment; partial or complete social isolation; increased psychological and physical dependence on parents; specially developed need for affection and acceptance; intensification of behavioural disorders, difficult to accept in the social environment, and coming as a consequence of suffering from disability; hindered perception and evaluation of various situations they face and behaviours they encounter (quoted after Piekarska, 2007).

The examples of the direction of research considering the characteristics of abused children with disabilities are also studies of *gender differences*. These are e.g. a study conducted by Sullivan and Knutson (1998) who tried to measure gender preferences among abused disabled children; a study exploring the gender influence on forms and incidence of maltreatment among children with disabilities, by comparison with children without disabilities carried out by Sobsey, Randall and Parrill (1997).

Other examples of this direction are: examinations aimed at estimating the child's peak *age of vulnerability to abuse*, and studies focused on describing the *influence of race* on the phenomenon of abuse among children with disabilities (Crosse et al., n.d.; Sullivan & Knutson, 1998; Sobsey et al. 1997; Wolcott 1997).

### IV. Abuse risk factors for children with disabilities

In consequence of different examinations, we can say that many factors related to family, the welfare system and societal variables, have been found responsible for the increased abuse risk among children with disabilities (Burrell et al. 1994; Mitchell & Buchelle-Ash, 2000; Sobsey, 1994; Steiberg & J.R.Hylton, 1998).

In general, the usual abuse risk factors for disabled children are not in any way different from the ones related to the general population of children. However, some of the factors apply particularly to children with disabilities; which means



that they operate more intensively (Bennett and Baladerian, 2005). For instance, according to Burrell et al. (1994), such factors as *stress*, family *financial resources* and *social support* are particularly significant determinants of abuse risk among children with disabilities. Benedict et al. (1992) observed that such a factor is *negative perception of stress situations*, which was frequently revealed in the families with disabled children which have been reported to the services because of abuse.

A considerable number of researchers cling to the view that disability of a child itself causes increased stress in a family (e.g. Outstread 1974 quoting after Lew-Starowicz & Lew-Starowicz, 1994; Rogow & Hass 1999; Jones et al., 1995; Tomison, 1996; Connell et al., 2007). On the other hand, there is a group of experts who claim that it is not so much the stress caused by the child's disability, but the lack of social support and inappropriate financial means necessary to meet the disabled children's specific needs, that are of the highest importance here (Sobsey, 1994; Steiberg & Hylton, 1998; Tomison 1996).

The studies conducted by Sobsey (1994) and Wolcott (1997) demonstrate that there are also other risk factors, such as *negative social attitudes* and *beliefs towards disability*, which are responsible for the increasing risk of abuse of children with disabilities. The interpretation of the role of negative attitudes towards disability is different. Some authors think, that this situation can decrease the child's value in the parents' eyes, but also among professionals, who are less willing to help the child or are not eager to intervene because of the difficulties to help in this situation. Others think that negative social attitudes might be internalized by disabled children themselves, and make their self-esteem lower and not worthy of someone's help (Sobsey, 1994).

## **V. Characteristics of parents and families abusing children with disabilities**

The research into this area concentrate mainly on identifying which family members abuse disabled children most often. The example can be the examinations carried out by Sobsey (1994), Crosse et al. (n.d.), or Sullivan and Knutson (2000), which explicitly prove that *mothers* are the most frequent offenders. An exception is sexual abuse of disabled children within the family. In this case the most common type of perpetrator was a man. As far as other features of parents and families are concerned, Sobsey (1994) and Wolcott (1997) in their studies point to *parents' addiction problems*. The examinations conducted by Sobsey (1994), Sullivan and Cork (1996), Jones et al. (1995), and those carried out by Bennet and Baladerian (2005), revealed that there are also other features of parents perpetrating abuse, which are significant factors in the abuse of children with disabilities. They include *parents' childhood abuse experiences*, *low impulse control*, *poor ability to cope with*

*problems, low level of psychological competence, low self-esteem and their own disabilities.* The research projects undertaken by Rycuss and Hughes (1998), and by Burelli et al. (1994) show that the risk of maltreatment in children with disabilities may be higher if *parents view* their child as “different”, unlike, or worse than any other child, and if they “mourn” the loss of a “normal” child, or if they see the disability as an embarrassment or perceived punishment.

## **VI. Specific character of aid**

Domestic violence against children with disabilities poses a problem which is particularly difficult to deal with and prevent (Olivan-Gonzalvo, 2005; Lightfoot & LaLiberte, 2006). In this area numerous barriers have been pointed out, which hinder approaching the cases, and decrease the effectiveness of provided aid (Bennett & Baladerian, 2005; Kendal-Tackett, et al., 2005). The main obstacle is the *restricted possibility to recognize* the features of maltreatment in children with disabilities. It results from such factors as: limited possibility to identify and assess the symptoms of maltreatment, which very often resemble behavioural patterns and the characteristics related to disability; communication problems of disabled children, which require using specific communication methods, and for example “interrogating” the child; or disability in general, which makes communication itself impossible. The list mentioned above should also include two other determinants such as the dominance of medical approach with regard to both society’s and professionals’ interest in disabled children, and to the character of provided help; and generally limited access to the population of children with disabilities (Parmelee, Howard, Beckwith, 1984; Elvik, et al, 1990; Benedict et al, 1990; Kvam, 2000; Cederborg & Lamb, 2006).

The barriers encountered in the process of providing special aid, in the cases under examination, arise also as a consequence of low competence in the specific character of the particular disability type, which is displayed by the services protecting children from maltreatment. In their studies Bennet and Baladerian (2005), and Kendall-Tackett et al. (2005) demonstrate that difficulties in finding a backup caregiver for a disabled child might considerably restrict the professional’s possibility to recognize the problem of child maltreatment within the family. There is also research evidence which proves that children with developmental difficulties and physical health disabilities are placed at higher risk for maltreatment recurrences (Connell, et al. 2007; DePanfilis & Zuravin, 1999).

## **VII. Parents with disabilities and child maltreatment**

Studies concerning the issue of disabled parents who abuse children (children in general) are definitely less common than the research examining the risk of



abuse for children with disabilities. Empirical studies of the topic focus mainly on estimating the risk of child maltreatment (violence and neglect) perpetrated by parents with disabilities. For instance, the studies conducted by Llewellyn et al. (2003) aimed at measuring the incidence of child abuse perpetrated by parents with disabilities, which had been reported to child protective services in Australia. In their research Seagull and Scheurer (1986) investigated the phenomenon of child abuse by parents with intellectual disabilities. Other examples are the studies conducted by Bishop (2003) or Llewellyn et al. (2003). Lindsey et al. (2001) examined the most dominating form of abuse experienced in childhood by intellectually impaired parents who abuse their children.

### **VIII. Approaching the cases involving disabled parents who abuse their children**

Examples of this direction of research are studies exploring the possibilities for providing effective help for disabled parents who abuse their children. These are American studies carried out by Nam, Meezan and Danzinger (2006), investigating involvement of parents who abuse their children with child protective services; and examining the intellectual level and learning abilities of mothers, as a determinant of the involvement.

### **IX. Consequences of abuse among children with disabilities**

As far as this direction of research is concerned, authors usually tried to find out whether children with disabilities suffer more negative consequences of abuse than their non-disabled counterparts. Sullivan and Knutson (2000) in their research investigated the effects of maltreatment and neglect on children's school performance and attendance, comparing disabled and non-disabled children. The findings showed that the effects were worse in the group of children with disabilities. Some other researchers, e.g. Cruze et al. (1988), proved in their studies that the impact of maltreatment (in this case of sexual abuse) was more devastating on disabled than non-disabled children.

### **X. Development of disabilities as a result of child maltreatment**

The research question within this area is mainly: are the children experiencing maltreatment (violence and neglect) placed at increased risk for disability? The early studies of Chotiner and Legh (1976) showed that 58 % of the children who had been victims of abuse in their families consequently displayed the symptoms of mental retardation (quoting after Lew-Starowicz & Lew-Starowicz, 1994). Other researchers, such as Sandgrund (1974) or Eppler (1977), also concluded that the effect of abuse and neglect was mental retardation. Many research studies investi-

gate the contribution of neglect of young children to the development of their intellectual disabilities <sup>4</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

It seems that when specifying and characterizing the need for expanding research into problems concerning the relationship between disability and the phenomenon of child abuse within the family, it should be primarily considered to identify the necessary directions of the subject investigation. It is due to the fact that every society is characterized by its individual distinctive features as far as the subject problems are concerned (disability and child maltreatment), since they are determined by social and cultural contexts, characteristic of a given society and country, within which the problems appear. The research tendencies (areas and directions) presented in the article reveal certain possibilities in the field of the subject investigation, and can stimulate researchers' imagination and encourage ideas.

Another fundamental issue, alongside the problems concerning areas and directions of empirical research, is specifying the methodology and tools of such empirical studies. Since the range of issues concerning methodological solutions used in the research is broad, it should be examined separately. Therefore, the author of the article will only signal the fact that the preliminary analysis proves that empirical research is dominated by epidemiological studies, which either are based on incident studies or involve identifying prevalence of the problem within a population. Sometimes researchers concentrate on identifying disability features among (identified) maltreated children (e.g. Sullivan and Knutson 1998; and Sullivan and Knutson, 2000), or within the group of children who experience parental physical punishment (e.g. Youssef et al. 1998). It happens that research involves measuring the incidence of the problem of maltreatment among the population of disabled children in general, or in comparison with the rate of occurrence of the phenomenon in the population of non-disabled children. There is also research which involves examining population groups of disabled children and their families, as well as conducting comparative studies of two population groups: children with and without any disabilities. One can also come across research aimed at distinguishing various types of disabilities within the population of maltreated children.

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<sup>4</sup> I suggest a paper on this issue E. Jarosz, "Zaniedbywanie dzieci w rodzinie – znaczenie zjawiska i zasady interwencji w świetle współczesnej wiedzy", *Wychowanie na co dzień* 2007, no. 9.

Moreover, it is worth noticing that research can be conducted in two ways: it can involve examining the actual present experiences reported by the population groups, or be based on retrospective *studies* (e.g. Wald and Knutson 2000; Lindsey et al. 2001; or Embry, 2001, quoted by Kendall-Tackett, et al., 2005). Occasional longitudinal *case studies* are conducted (e.g. Elmer, 1977; Taitz 1981).

Considerably less common *qualitative research*, based on individual case analysis, is being undertaken alongside quantitative studies (e.g. Elmer, 1997; Roberts and Ellis, 1979; Weinberg 1997).

Developing empirical and theoretical analyses of the problems concerning child maltreatment, in the context of children's or parents' disability, may prove beneficial for intervention practice, which undoubtedly fosters reflection among researchers and intensifies their research attempts. It concerns, for instance, the commonly signalled difficulties in identifying the problem, and an evident need for improving detection of maltreatment among disabled children and defining the features of the phenomenon. It is an example of an issue which poses a serious challenge for researchers. Similarly, other difficulties identified in the course of research, such as problems concerning intervention in case of child maltreatment related to disability, generate "demand" for further studies and analyses.

In the light of the peculiar meta-analysis of the current research findings, we can conclude that:

- *Disability creates a higher risk of child maltreatment*
- *Maltreated children with disabilities have a lower chance of receiving help which they need*
- *Research into the relationship between disability and child maltreatment needs to be intensified and developed*
- *Research into the relationship mentioned above has a direct effect on improving the character and the range of intervention measures, and the reach and scope of help provided for disabled children who are victims of maltreatment within the family*

Taking into consideration the above conclusions, we can recommend that Polish researchers, both those who investigate the problem of child maltreatment, and those examining the issue of disability (especially among children), take into account the relationship between disability and child maltreatment, which has already been scientifically proved, when focusing on intensifying the development of the subject studies.

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